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U.S. Role Limited in Saigon Crisis

In facing the political crisis in South Viet Nam, the United States is restricted to the role of the Sedang tribesmen who refuse to fight the fires that occasionally destroy their thatched homes. They place red cords around the flames and if the burning stops, all is well. But if the fire persists, these Montagnards view it as a sign that the anger of the spirits has not subsided.

South Viet Nam is a political tinderbox. The student-Buddhist uprising in Dan Nang is more than a powerplay among generals because it rattles the varied instabilities in the fragmented population. With luck its chief consequence will be a shift in the military hierarchy, but it also must be taken as a sign that the factional splits are deepening despite all efforts to rally a common front against the Viet Cong.

These developments betray the unhappy fact that these splintered interests still take priority over the larger dimensions of the anti-Communist struggle. The Buddhists moved when Maj. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi was fired because they regarded him as their buttress against the Catholic influence in the Saigon directorate and because they saw an opportunity to reach for greater power. The rumbling in Saigon is a fresh warning that insurrection is a persisting threat to the capital city.

One of the least reported menaces to South Viet Nam's cohesion is the Fulro movement among the Montagnards, the tribesmen scattered along the nation's mountainous spine. Fed by ancient and well-nourished animosities, the movement has gained momentum since

1964 when the Montagnards proclaimed a struggle to liberate themselves "from the Vietnamese yoke."

The back country strife flowing from this proclamation is significant because it concerns almost a million strategically located people who have been enlisted by the United States Special Forces and the CIA to meet the guerrillas on their own ground.

Fulro has forces organized in battalion units that operate from bases in Cambodia. The Viet Cong encourage the tribesmen's aspirations for a separate kingdom and apparently give them rifles. Their potential was demonstrated last Dec. 18 when Montagnards guarding the capital of Quan Duc province allowed 150 Fulro soldiers to enter and capture the city. As in earlier incidents in 1964, they were persuaded to surrender without a showdown.

Fulro planned and for some reason postponed a move at the same time against the II Corps headquarters at Pleiku. To date the movement has not been bold enough to become a serious cause of bloodshed but it is eroding the sympathies of tribesmen for whom the United States has enabled the provincial governments to build new hamlets with new opportunities for employment and education.

Against this splintered background, President Johnson must deal delicately with the political dilemmas of the central government. "If you have another Honolulu conference, you'd better bring all

ten generals," Sen. Albert Gore, D-Tenn., chided Secretary of State Dean Rusk as the Senate Foreign Relations Committee met Tuesday. "We brought four — we thought that would be enough," Rusk replied.

The cries for civilian government recall Lord Acton's observation, "The danger is not that a particular class is unfit to govern. Every class is unfit to govern."

The military directorate under Premier Nguyen Cao Ky has been much more responsive to American pressures for social reform than the civilian government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Ky complains at his need to cope with the vested interests but he has gone along.

The People's Action Teams and the new Ministry of Revolutionary Development are tokens of the directorate's readiness to adopt imaginative devices proposed by the Americans. One danger now is that so many new ideas will be rained upon the hard-pressed native bureaucracy that none of them will be executed with the thoroughness they require.

The United States can apply its imagination, wealth and power to the problems, but only the South Vietnamese can fabricate a sense of nationhood and government. This will take leadership which transcends the function of dispensing aid from abroad. Ky and the directorate have caught the spirit but they have not found a voice to convey it.